



BEFORE THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Federal Railroad Administration

Docket No. FRA-2026-0562

First Coast Railroad's Petition for One-Person Train Crews

May 14, 2026

These comments are submitted on behalf of the Transportation Division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD), an organization representing approximately 100,000 transportation employees with active rail members working in all operating crafts, including engineers, conductors, trainmen, switchmen, hostlers, and yardmasters.

SMART-TD submits the following comments in strong opposition to the First Coast Railroad's petition for special approval to initiate one-person train crew operations on its Fernandina and Kingsland Subdivisions as described under Docket No. FRA-2026-0562.

On April 2, 2024, after years of hearings, public participation, and extensive review of rail operational safety concerns, the Federal Railroad Administration finalized its Train Crew Size Safety Requirements Rule establishing a federal minimum standard requiring two-person train crews except in narrowly defined circumstances. FRA reached that conclusion after reviewing more than 13,500 public comments and considering testimony from railroad workers, emergency responders, labor organizations, safety professionals, industry stakeholders, and members of the public.

That rulemaking process reflected decades of operational experience across the freight rail industry. FRA has already made formal findings in its Train Crew Size Safety Requirements Rule that two-person crews are necessary to ensure baseline safety.

First Coast Railroad now asks FRA to waive that federal safety standard and permit one-person train operations based upon an operational model that removes the conductor from the locomotive and instead places the conductor in a highway vehicle "shadowing" the train by roadway. The burden in this proceeding is not on labor organizations or the public to prove why two-person freight crews are safer. FRA has already answered that question through formal federal rulemaking. The burden remains with the applicant to demonstrate, with compelling evidence, that its proposed operation is "as safe or safer" than a traditional two-person freight crew operation.

The petition is factually incomplete and lacks evidentiary support. The insufficiency of the safety case and no supporting data is clear. There are no human factor studies, no simulation or field testing, no empirical comparison to two-person operations, no analysis of emergency scenarios and no documented risk assessment methodology.

SMART-TD submits that First Coast Railroad has not demonstrated that a one-person operation provides at least an equivalent level of safety. Waivers under 49 CFR Part 211 require a clear demonstration that the proposed alternative provides an equivalent level of safety.

Furthermore, our union notes that the petition materials themselves contain significant inconsistencies, omissions, and unsupported representations that prevent meaningful public or regulatory evaluation of the proposed operation.

One of the strengths of the case for this waiver, was the fact that First Coast was able to say they would not be transporting hazardous materials on their 1-PC trains. However, the Special Approval Petition, Non-Excepted Operation Worksheet they submitted identifies that they have plans on transporting Haz-Mat.

This inconsistency raises substantial questions regarding the scope of the proposed operation and whether the petition accurately reflects the commodities that may move over the territory subject to this waiver request.

The worksheet also identifies industries served by the operation that include “paper/chemicals” and “oil/gas.” Yet the petition contains no meaningful discussion regarding hazardous material response planning, emergency mitigation procedures, evacuation coordination, or how a separated crew configuration would safely respond to a hazardous materials incident.

If hazardous materials may be involved in any capacity, the absence of a detailed emergency response framework or risk assessment is particularly concerning, given the railroad’s proposal to physically separate crew responsibilities between a moving train and a roadway vehicle.

Additionally, the petition states that “Special System Instructions Item 11.3 One-Person Crew Operating Rules” are attached and applicable to the proposed operation. However, SMART-TD has been unable to locate those operating rules within the publicly available docket materials.

This omission is significant. FRA and the public cannot reasonably evaluate whether the proposed operation satisfies the “as safe or safer” standard when the operating rules governing the one-person operation itself are unavailable for review.

Similarly, the worksheet indicates that five years of Part 225 accident and incident data were attached to the petition materials. Yet no such supporting accident data appears to be publicly available within the docket materials reviewed by SMART-TD.

Without access to the underlying accident and incident history for the operation, the public cannot independently evaluate the railroad’s safety claims, operational trends, or the validity of the railroad’s conclusions regarding risk mitigation.

SMART-TD also notes that the worksheet leaves both maximum train length and maximum tonnage limitations listed as “None,” despite the form specifically directing the applicant to provide an explanation if no limitations exist. No explanation appears to have been provided.

The absence of any stated limitations on train size or tonnage creates additional uncertainty regarding the scope of the proposed operation and undermines the railroad’s claim that meaningful operational risk boundaries have been established.

Taken together, these omissions and inconsistencies further demonstrate that the petition lacks the specificity, transparency, and evidentiary support necessary for FRA or the public to

meaningfully determine whether the proposed operation can legitimately satisfy the required “as safe or safer” standard.

Another concerning issue is that First Coast Railroad currently operates with three-person crews. That operational reality substantially undermines the railroad’s argument that a reduction all the way to a one-person crew operation is necessary or capable of maintaining equivalent safety standards.

If First Coast Railroad truly believed operational efficiencies required reduced crew sizes, existing federal regulations already permit reduction from three-person crews to two-person crews under appropriate circumstances. Instead, the railroad seeks authority to eliminate the onboard conductor position entirely and replace it with a model requiring the conductor to follow the train in a motor vehicle while maintaining radio communication with the locomotive engineer throughout the trip.

That proposal introduces entirely new operational hazards that do not exist under conventional crew operations.

Across the railroad industry, it is widely understood within locomotive operations that the conductor traditionally handles a substantial portion of crew radio communications while the train is moving. This longstanding practice exists for a reason. Operating a locomotive safely already requires constant situational awareness, signal recognition, track observation, speed compliance, braking management, and monitoring of the train itself. Railroad operating culture and practical human-factors experience recognize that adding unnecessary communication burdens to the locomotive engineer increases distraction and operational risk.

Under First Coast Railroad’s proposed waiver, the engineer would become the sole crewmember aboard the locomotive and therefore, would, out of necessity, assume responsibility for handling all operational radio communications while simultaneously operating the train. The cognitive saturation of tasks that are shared with a two-person crew would be placed onto one person, reducing situational awareness, increased likelihood of missed signals, and the possibility of delayed actions, including braking response.

Compounding that concern, the engineer would also be expected to maintain ongoing radio communication with the offsite conductor operating a highway vehicle near grade crossings and adjacent roadways.

This communication structure presents serious human-factors concerns that the railroad’s risk assessment fails to meaningfully address.

Distracted driving associated with communication devices is a well-documented cause of roadway accidents throughout the United States. Yet the petition proposes a conductor operating a motor vehicle while simultaneously engaged in continuous railroad radio communications

associated with train movement, switching activities, crossing protection, and emergency coordination.

SMART-TD therefore asks several direct operational questions that remain unanswered within the petition:

- Does First Coast Railroad intend to equip company vehicles with hands-free communication technology specifically designed to minimize distracted driving hazards for conductors shadowing trains by roadway?
- If not, how does the railroad intend to mitigate the known safety risks associated with operating a motor vehicle while actively engaged in railroad radio communications?
- What procedures will govern situations requiring the crew to receive and copy mandatory directives or other dispatcher-issued instructions?

The petition provides no meaningful explanation regarding how mandatory directives will safely be handled under this operational model.

Will the locomotive engineer be expected to copy and repeat dispatcher instructions while simultaneously operating the locomotive?

Will the conductor be expected to handle mandatory directives while actively driving a highway vehicle?

Will one or both crew members be required to stop movement in order to safely copy and repeat dispatcher instructions?

Each possible answer creates additional operational and safety concerns.

If the engineer is expected to handle mandatory directives while operating the train, the proposal creates an obvious distraction and task-overload scenario inconsistent with safe locomotive operation.

If the conductor is expected to handle mandatory directives while operating a highway vehicle, the proposal similarly creates a distracted-driving hazard involving a vehicle operating in proximity to public roadways and grade crossings.

If train movement must stop while dispatcher instructions are copied and repeated, the proposed operating model introduces procedural delays that may offset or eliminate the claimed efficiency gains. Repeated unnecessary train stops and starts can increase the risk of train separations, slack-action incidents, and operational inefficiencies while simultaneously prolonging grade crossing blockages.

Likewise, if the conductor must stop the vehicle to safely copy instructions while the train continues moving, the conductor risks losing close proximity to the train entirely, potentially jeopardizing radio communication reliability and conflicting with the railroad's own representation that the conductor will remain in "close proximity" to the train at all times.

None of these scenarios demonstrate a safety equivalent to a conventional onboard two-person crew.

The railroad's own petition repeatedly relies upon vague terminology that cannot be meaningfully evaluated or objectively enforced. The petition states that the conductor will remain in "close proximity" to the train throughout operations. Yet the railroad provides no measurable standard defining what constitutes "close proximity."

What distance is considered acceptable?

How will compliance be measured?

What occurs when roadway congestion, blocked crossings, weather conditions, disabled vehicles, roadway accidents, mechanical issues, or inaccessible crossings prevent the conductor from maintaining that undefined proximity?

The petition provides no meaningful answers. In addition, close proximity could invite inconsistent compliance, making it impossible for FRA inspectors to verify in real time, ultimately making this an unenforceable condition. The absence of an objective proximity renders the proposal difficult, if not impossible, for FRA to regulate in the field, creating a compliance framework that is inherently subjective.

Similarly, First Coast Railroad acknowledges that communication redundancy may require reliance upon portable radios if locomotive radio systems fail. Yet the petition contains no meaningful analysis regarding radio dead zones, communication interruptions, roadway interference, or signal reliability during emergency situations.

The entire operational premise of this waiver depends upon uninterrupted communication between a locomotive engineer operating alone aboard the train and a conductor operating separately by highway vehicle. Yet the railroad provides little substantive analysis explaining how communication failures, delays, or degraded radio conditions would impact safety.

SMART-TD is also compelled to address the railroad's reliance upon locomotive alerter systems as mitigation for engineer incapacitation.

An alerter device is not remotely equivalent to the presence of a certified conductor aboard the train and the device can only initiate a penalty brake application after the engineer has already become incapacitated. It cannot render aid. It cannot communicate critical situational information to dispatchers or emergency responders. It cannot inspect the train, protect crossings, identify hazards, evacuate the public, or assist first responders during emergencies.

Conductors exist to help prevent emergencies from escalating into catastrophes. A mechanical penalty brake application after tragedy has already occurred is not equivalent to a second trained crewmember physically present aboard the train. The traveling conductor could be delayed in

reaching the train due to geography and unable to physically secure the train or even assist in an evacuation or protect the scene.

Additionally, it is unclear if First Coast Railroad intends to transport hazardous materials. Even if they do not, that doesn't eliminate the public safety risks associated with one-person crew operations. Other trains transporting hazardous materials may operate in the same territory, and accidents involving grade crossings, roadway vehicles, derailments, trespassers, or emergency responders remain entirely possible regardless of the commodity involved.

SMART-TD further notes that FRA's own 2024 final rule explicitly recognized the "important role both crewmembers play in the safe operation of trains." FRA's findings acknowledged the operational redundancy, communication support, emergency response capability, and situational awareness that two qualified crewmembers provide.

Nothing in First Coast Railroad's petition demonstrates that those concerns have somehow disappeared in the short time since FRA issued that rule.

If anything, this petition highlights precisely why onboard crew redundancy remains essential.

To this end, DOT Secretary Duffy and FRA Administrator Fink were both correct in their public statements supporting the 2024 FRA ruling that made 2-Person freight train crews the standard for safety in this country. It is our belief that nothing in the waiver petition from First Coast undermines the foundation of logic on which these leaders based their stated beliefs during their Senate Confirmation hearings.

Finally, given the significant public safety implications associated with this petition, SMART-TD formally requests that FRA convene a public hearing regarding this waiver request. This petition, if granted, would effectively establish a precedent for separation of crew duties across a moving freight train in U.S. rail operations. Safety implications, along with the national precedent that would be established, demand this issue be given proper attention and consideration.

Should this approval be considered, FRA must publish a technical basis, disclose any supporting risk assessments, and allow the commentors an opportunity for a rebuttal of any safety analysis submitted by the applicant.

These issues warrant full public examination and testimony rather than limited written submissions alone.

For all these reasons, SMART-TD strongly urges FRA to deny First Coast Railroad's petition for special approval of one-person train crew operations in Docket No. FRA-2026-0562.

We thank FRA for the opportunity to provide comments on this important safety matter and respectfully urge the agency to uphold the federal minimum crew standards established through its own recent and thorough rulemaking process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Jared Cassity". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jared" being more prominent than the last name "Cassity".

Jared Cassity
National Safety & Legislative Director